

SCHOOL FACILITIES INITIATIVE TASK FORCE  
THURSDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2014 – 6:30 P.M.  
TOWN HALL ANNEX, COMMUNITY ROOM 1

I. ROLL CALL

Present: Ambroise (6:42 p.m.), Ackerman, Beaulieu, Cabral, de la Cruz (6:39 p.m.),  
Greenleaf, Koehler, Trejo, Zod  
Staff: Oefinger, Graner, Kilpatrick, Bresnayan  
Ex-officio: Watson, Schmidt  
Consultant: Mike Zuba

There was no quorum so no formal action was taken. Those present discussed the items on the agenda.

II. APPROVAL OF MINUTES – October 30, 2014 and November 13, 2014

No action.

III. PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS - None

IV. ITEMS OF BUSINESS

a. Introduction

Koehler provided an overview of the purpose of the meeting. Representatives from the Board of Education, Town Council, RTM, Permanent School Building Committee, and Parks and Recreation were present in the audience.

Graner explained that the school facilities plan is a plan for the next 30 or 40 years that represents a fundamental reorganization of the district. The plan addresses “Three Es”: Effective (competitive with magnet schools); Equitable (one middle school that will address racial imbalance); and Efficient (eligible for 80 % reimbursement and consolidates schools from 10 to 8).

Graner presented a short video on the Middle Years Program (MYP) that leads into the International Baccalaureate (IB) program at the high school.

When racial imbalance occurs, district boundaries are changed and parents are tired of it. A single middle school provides the opportunity for racial balance in grades 6 through 8. The plan includes creating two elementary schools out of renovated Cutler and West Side middle schools that would be balanced by neighborhood and through a magnet component. The schools would be eligible for 80% reimbursement and consolidation would save on administrative staff costs. Slightly larger elementary schools would help with class sizes.

Graner reviewed the “do nothing” alternative and the costs of renovating existing schools.

The consolidated middle school would house approximately 900 students and be located adjacent to the high school. Graner reviewed towns with middle school enrollments of 850+. The school would utilize a cluster system. The renovation of Cutler and West Side to elementary schools would be eligible for 80% reimbursement and would incorporate diversity themes. There is a current moratorium on magnet schools in Connecticut. The plan would also close Claude Chester, Pleasant Valley, and S. B. Butler, which would be turned over to the Town for possible reuse.

Graner distributed a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document for information purposes.

- b. Recap to Date (Stakeholder Meeting, Educational Specification Adoption, SFITF Discussions)
- c. Feasibility of Co-Located Middle School (High School and Merritt Property)
- d. Site Analysis – Opportunities and Constraints
- e. Feasibility “Test Fits”

Mr. Zuba provided a recap of efforts to date. To identify a location for the middle school proximal to Fitch High School, Milone and MacBroom reviewed existing site conditions (slopes, soils); circulation patterns; support facilities, and athletic facilities and fields. The high school site is constrained by St. Mary’s and the unavailability of the Erickson property to the south. Mr. Zuba reviewed opportunities and constraints of the Merritt property.

Milone and MacBroom developed and eliminated two concepts (A and B) for siting a 160,000 sq. ft. building footprint. Mr. Zuba reviewed the considerations associated with each of the options.

Option C sites the middle school on the Merritt property. The test fit was based on educational specifications provided by the Board of Education, but the consultant would still have to look at different design components. In response to a request to move the middle school closer to the high school for synergy, Milone and MacBroom developed Option D. The middle school would be as close as possible to the high school (approximately 700 feet) and the site would accommodate four fields. Mr. Zuba reviewed considerations for Options C and D.

Mr. Zuba noted that he and the Town Manager have met with the State Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) and identified a mechanism and process for converting the Merritt property to a municipal educational use. It will be a lengthy process.

- f. Next Steps

Koehler explained that this meeting is to gauge the feelings of the rest of the community about where the task force is in the process. With respect to the Merritt property, the middle school proposal and the Parks and Recreation fields proposal are not mutually exclusive. The task force is looking for consensus and buy-in to meet educational and Parks and Recreation needs.

Town Manager Oefinger indicated that he will be meeting again with DEEP about potential open space parcels to swap for the Merritt property. The parcels are not only Town-owned, but other properties that have been identified as desirable open space parcels. Before the discussion with DEEP continues, there needs to be a general consensus that this is the direction to go and local policymakers should not be at odds. Oefinger provided an overview of the negotiations with DEEP.

In response to questions posed by attendees, the following discussion took place:

Koehler explained that the Merritt property was chosen because it creates a campus environment that allows for synergies with the high school and economies of scale. The Kolnaski site is not conducive to a single middle school. The Merritt property is more centrally located, does not require a land purchase, and recently became available. Board of Education member Schick stated that the Board's choice of the location was driven by future programs.

Graner addressed one middle school versus two. Consensus was reached following a retreat where it was determined that a campus in conjunction with the high school IB program would be desirable and could accommodate students from other districts (revenue generation).

Mr. Zuba explained that the needs of the athletic program are driven by the educational specifications. This plan results in a net gain of fields because fields at the current middle schools will remain.

Cost estimates have not been developed because there must first be consensus to move forward. Koehler explained that the task force is attempting to identify the best educational and facility program rather than being bottom line driven. Steps are being taken to increase the reimbursement rate and lower costs. Mr. Zuba added that for the first time in a number of years the reimbursement rate for athletic facilities has increased.

With respect to field availability, Graner noted that a single middle school will have fewer sports teams. Also, the addition of a synthetic field with lights expands opportunities.

Mr. Zuba explained that before Cutler and West Side could be converted to elementary schools, the middle school would have to be up and running. There would be a lag in pulling the elementary schools off line.

With respect to the land swap process, the Town Manager noted that a plan can be developed quickly, but implementation could take a year.

Discussion followed on the economic east-west divide in the Town. Graner noted that when you raise expectations, achievement level rises. He expounded on the importance of equity that needs to be addressed in Groton through the program and facilities.

Graner reiterated the three reasons for the plan – effective, equitable, efficient. It became clear during the retreat that one middle school will address cost, programming, and racial imbalance. Mr. Zuba added that a single middle school provides a lot of opportunities. It is a cost effective manner (through cost avoidance) to open the door to educational opportunities. Zod added that this plan provides the “most bang for the buck” from facilities and programming as well.

Koehler noted that this plan includes recreational fields, and long term it will open up Claude Chester and S. B. Butler for additional fields. Including the fields as part of the school plan makes them eligible for partial reimbursement.

Oefinger explained the history of the Town’s purchase of the Merritt property.

Mr. Zuba explained that the task force and consultant did an exhaustive search of potential sites including test fits. A number of viable sites were in private ownership and their locations were not publicized because of the potential impact on their selling price.

Examples of a campus style middle school that people could look at are in Bethel, Madison, and Griswold.

Discussion followed on “metrics of educational attainment”. Mr. Zuba noted increased efficiencies resulting from the middle and high schools being within walking distance and the synergy with the large auditorium at the high school. Graner noted there are many ways to measure educational attainment noting that 70% of students are ineligible to join the military. Other metrics include high school completion rate; college admissions and completion rates; employment; community service; participation in the arts; the number of students that participate in and complete certificate programs; scores on AP tests; and the number of IB students. Many students leave Groton schools to participate in other towns’ magnet schools. Educational quality brings revenue to the Town. Graner summarized by saying that not everything that is countable counts.

The three elementary schools slated for closure as part of this plan require significant work to stay on line and it doesn’t make sense to put money into them. Both programming and facilities were considered in the development of the plan.

Norris suggested that economic development is a driver too. Good schools increase property values and attract development.

It was noted that the Town is facing two potential referendums – conversion of Fitch Middle School and the school facilities initiative. Town Manager Oefinger noted that neither project will be ready for referendum by November 2015, but both are necessary. The last school referendum failed because of a total and complete lack of political support. The average homeowner wants to be led. Political leaders have to stop saying “let the voters decide” and they need to have some conviction. Everyone has a responsibility to talk to people and take the opportunity to educate people. However long it takes to get all of the political leaders on the same page will be time well spent. Residents want to do the right thing. The Town has had success with well thought out referendums supported by advocates. The intent of tonight’s discussion is to reinforce that differences have to be put aside and consideration given to what is best for Groton.

Zod noted that the status quo is not sustainable and “do nothing” is not an option. Greenleaf added that three years ago, \$50 million in status quo work in the schools was identified. He reviewed specific facilities issues.

Mr. Zuba conducted a straw poll and the majority of those present expressed support for moving forward with the plan presented. Town Manager Oefinger noted that a special meeting could be held to review the sites that were considered if that would be helpful.

Koehler thanked everyone for coming.

g. Adoption of 2015 Regular Meeting Schedule

No action was taken on this item due to the lack of a quorum. The next meeting of the Task Force will be a special meeting on January 22<sup>nd</sup>.

A wrap up discussion of fields and the racial imbalance issue followed.

V. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting adjourned at 9:12 p.m.